Conrad, Romancer, In His English Home

World Famous Novelist and Dramatist Talks Intimately of His Own Adventurous Wanderings in Many Lands and of His Literary Work

By CHARLES H. MELTZER

TO THOUSANDS Joseph Conrad seems the greatest living English-writing novelist. To me he has always spelled two splendid things, the charm of style, and the glamour of romance. But when I wrote to ask if I could call on him, he was ill, quite ill. I possessed my soul with patience. Then, to my deep delight, I got this message, sent from Bishopsbourne: "I am expecting you on Wednesday afternoon."

Bishopsbourne is a tiny hamlet, made up of old picturesque thatched cottages, a fourteenth century church, and a few country seats.

"Oswald's," the home of Joseph Conrad, stands at the foot of a descending rustic road, quite near the church. White wooden gates, clipped hedges and a lawn. Beyond the lawn a low, two-storied house, surmounted by a tall, sloped roof of slate. The architecture Georgian, plain and square. A calm and pleasant place, with an environment of meads and woods. Too calm, and too shut in for one whose life, till 20 or thirty years ago, had been spent largely on the sea. And so, indeed, it seems to the inventor of "Youth," "Victory," and "Chance." For when I spoke of the fair landscape, he grimaced and said he was not happy without wide horizons.

He met me in the hall, with a kind smile, shook hands and led the way into his study. A low, square, white-walled room on the ground floor, which looked out on green fields and spreading trees. Two bookcases, well lined with biographical and historical works, with fiction here and there. But not much fiction. A table. A few chairs. An open hearth, with a most welcome fire. For it was chill and wet that day in Kent.

We settled down in armchairs by the fire. And as we lighted our cigarets, I looked at Conrad.

Imagine a warm-blooded, restless man, turned 60, somewhat weather-worn and lined. A man who found relief in constant movement. A rather ruddy face, intensely Polish. A long and prominent nose, a sensuous mouth. Gray eyes, that roved and smiled, and beamed and talked, half-hidden beneath eyelids, above which I saw thick brows. Hair almost brown, though whitening at the temples. A Vandyke beard, that matched a gray mustache. An intellectual forehead, full of thought; and, written everywhere, the signs of temperament. Though Conrad thinks he has grown very English, a more un-English man I never knew. His many years of intercourse with Britons have rather emphasized, than tamed, his foreign ways. He speaks correctly, but with a foreign intonation. His gestures, air and voice are wholly foreign. He cannot form one phrase, or express one thought, without signs and gestures. He is never, for a single instant, quiet.

I was so fascinated by his facial eloquence that more than once I hardly heard what he was saying. With his eyebrows, which went up and down at intervals, his eyes, his lips, his nose, his furrowed cheeks, his chin, he underscored and emphasized his speech. In France or Italy such things would have seemed quite appropriate. In Kent they were surprisingly incongruous.

Incongruous, if you will, yet not absurd. Indeed, their strangeness sometimes charmed and sometimes touched one. They were unconscious, or subconscious bids for sympathy; the bids of a great mind to a much smaller mind. It could not matter to a man like Joseph Conrad what an outsider like myself might think of him. But he was mastered by his nervous Polish temperament. He *had to* explain himself. His eyelids drooped over his eager eyes, till at moments all they showed were half-veiled pupils. The long lines descending from the sensitive nose relaxed or tightened. His words flowed on and on, like rushing streams, unceasingly, clear, vivid and unstilted, always natural.

Despite all his vast and wonderful experience, Joseph Conrad seems as ingenuous as a collegian. But he is free from the self-consciousness of youth—a blending of a scholar and an adventurer.

He is improbably emotional and thrilled by life, and greatly swayed, we may be sure, by varying moods. A man of passionate likings and profound dislikings. Though in many of his books he seems outside his characters, he is not impersonal. He is at most times both subjective and objective. He feels intensely, though he writes serenely. And, whatever else he may or may not be, he is a genius.

As he puffed vaguely at his cigaret, he crossed, uncrossed, recrossed his restless legs. Those hands of his—those hands—seemed always moving. No muscle of his face was ever still. From time to time he looked across the room, as if in quest of turbulent seas and lonely isles. And yet he said that he had lost his love of roving, and was resigned to being cut off from adventure.

Not quite, though. For, while the late World War raged, he made at least one journey on a British ship. He thinks the admiralty hoped that he would write of what he saw in the North Sea. But he wrote nothing.

"Why should I?" was his way of putting it. "I know so little of the war. My eldest son—a boy of 21—knows more. He served in France. But he has not my turn for writing. He has studied as a chemist, a metallurgist. I hope some day to make an engineer of him."

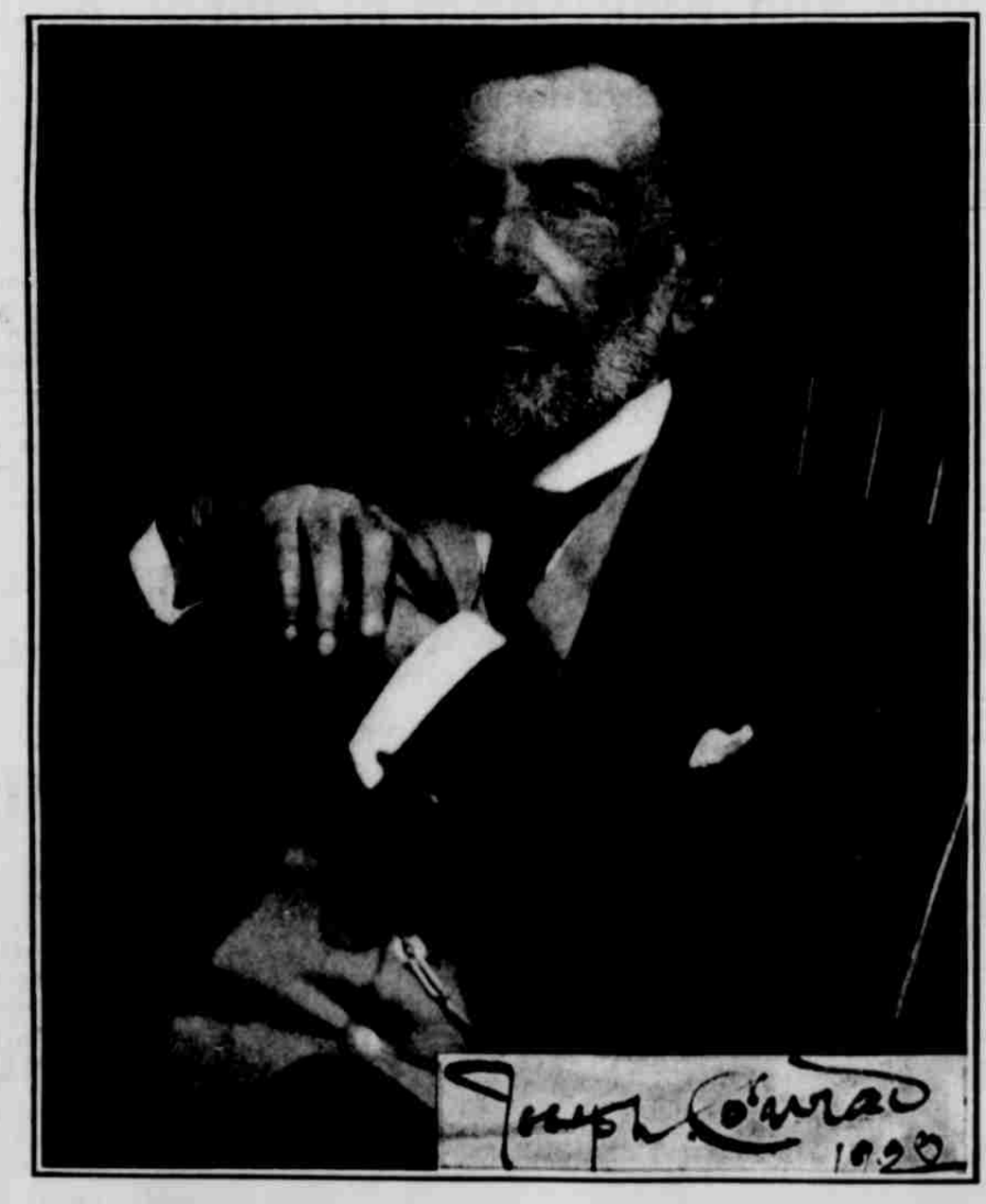
He has two sons—the one I speak of and a much younger lad. He has also a good, sensible English wife, just now an invalid; not literary. That is as well, perhaps. One author in one family seems enough. He loves to have his wife and sons about him. But not too close to him when he is working.

"I cannot write," said he, "except in solitude. There are long periods when I cannot write at all. Whole weeks go by, and nothing comes to me. Then something comes. And I go back to work."

He cannot understand how one can grind out lines and lines by rule and measure. Zola and Trollope may have found it easy. But he must be fired by his emotions before he can compose himself to work. Imagination, of course, helps him much. So does experience. He has known many, if not all, the diverse characters he has drawn. And he has lived—how he has lived—his marvelous tales.

"When I was young," he said, "I saw two wars. One I have touched on in 'The Golden Arrow.' How did I get into that war? Oh, well—I was a wild blade in my younger days, you know. But I reformed in—(never mind the date he mentioned) and now I write. I write not without effort. I still have frequent trouble with my sentences, for I don't always feel quite sure about my grammar. Well—even Flaubert sometimes failed in grammar But how he wrote and what a mind he had."

Of foreign novelists whom he admired, he named just three, French all of them. First Flaubert, and then Balzac and De Maupassant. He expressed a warm regard, too, for John Galsworthy, with whom he sailed



in the Far East, when he himself was acting as first officer on a vessel trading between England, Australia and the South Seas. He lived the whole of his sea life on trading ships. Before the mast, first—as an ordinary sailor, then as an A. B., then as a mate, and lastly as a master.

After many voyages to many ports, he once allowed himself some months of well-earned rest. He went to London, where he saw the sights. But time hung on his hands each day till noon came. To amuse himself he wrote the first eight chapters of his "Almayer's Folly." Then he went back to sea. When Galsworthy and he met on that homeward-trip, he showed the future author of "The Country House" what he had done. He also showed it to a friend named Sanderson. He wrought his story out in bits and patches, not hurrying through his task. He cannot hurry.

"Authors have sometimes told me, with much pride," said he, "that they have finished their last chapters. I cannot understand how any author can feel sure that he has finished any book. As for myself, I don't know what I think of my own works till I have had them typed. Nor even then am I quite sure. Nor even when at last I get my proofs. Not till I see what I have done bound up and published can I tell clearly how my own work impresses me. And then, alas, it is too late to change it."

He spoke with gratitude of the responsive way in which the reviewers, and especially the English reviewers, had written of his early tales and novels. He seemed to think that he owed most of all to *Blackwood*. It meant a great deal, he declared, to have his "Youth" and other stories in that magazine. He had been treated well, too, in America.

"I am now busy with the preface to the *edition de luxe* of my collected works. And—yes. Oh, yes. I am writing a new novel. I have also dramatized my 'Secret Agent.' Four acts. I think it ought to make a taking play."

"Heart of Darkness?" He had been to Central Africa. He had always longed to see the hidden heart of that mysterious continent. His chance came when, one day some relative who lived in Belgium had him made master of a Congo river boat. He was very ill just then. But he took on the job. He saw the awful things he has described so wondrously. He saw those evil and impenetrable woods. He heard the sounds that haunt one in the sinister and unholy Congo night. The tragic shores he passed to him were real. As real as the South Seas and Eastern isles.

"They call me a sea writer," he went on. "But, if I have so much to say about the sea, it is not only for the sake of doing so, but because I know so much of it, and write best of things I know. I never write for the mere sake of creating atmosphere. I always have a story in my mind when I begin to work. My characters—when I have found them—live to me. I see them moving there, before my eyes. Heyst, for example, in my 'Victory.' My 'Nigger.' 'Almayers,' and all the rest. And then I weave my tale about my characters. In my own way, of course, which seems to displease some critics. One said so, not so very long ago, in his review of my short story called 'The Duel.' He praised some things. But he disliked the indirectness of my style. And he was frankly bored. Too many duels in my tale to please him. But those duels had to be. I needed them. As for my style—well, when it suits me, I can be direct. My 'Victory' is surely clear enough."

I took the liberty of telling him that, of all his tales, "The Duel" charmed me the least. Why? Oh, because the English in it seemed less like straight English than translated French.

"I wrote it in that way deliberately," he answered. "In imitation of a Frenchman's narrative. To say that it reads like translated French is really to pay me a compliment."

Those critics. How they *do* put their feet in it. What nonsense they have talked about "The Rescue." They have chattered about some "new Conrad" whom they suppose they have discovered in that book. They do not know that what they have described as Conrad's "most recent"—yes, most recent work, was planned and largely written years and years ago, with several other tales, when Conrad was a sojourner in Brittany.

He showed me, bound up handsomely in leather, the original manuscript of that remarkable story of a man torn and disturbed by clashing ideals. He pointed out that he had first named his romance "The Rescuer." There must have been a long interval between the beginning and the completion of that story. For in the early chapters the author's handwriting was neat and cramped, while in the later passages it was free and confident. Most of the pages showed no sign of effort. They seemed to have been written without pain or strain. Others, however, had been much revised. Long paragraphs at points had been struck out, by an unsparing hand. One might have fancied, none the less, that the romance had cost its author no great worry. But that was an entirely wrong impression. Like almost all he does, the book was worked out slowly. The phrases and the beautiful prose rhythms had meant weeks and months of toil. Few books worth while are turned out without pain.

Then Conrad went into the matter of his rhythms. He confessed the trouble he had had (being a foreigner) in choosing his cadences; in struggling to avoid the Charybdis of sing-song and the Scylla of the overabrupt phrase. He had no music in his soul to assist him. For, though he likes and can enjoy some kinds